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Cultural Authentication and Fashion in the Global Factory: A Panel of Four Papers

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One of the seeds for the formation of this panel is of recent origin. Blim (1992) hypothesized the structure of the emerging "global factory" in five dimensions. Taken together they seriously challenge our division of contemporary textiles and apparel into separate categories of hand made traditional textiles and industrially made fashions.[1]

The cultural authentication seed traces its origins back more than 20 years. In their analysis of Kalabari consumption of Indian textiles in the Niger delta, Erekosima and Eicher (1981) developed the concept *cultural authentication* to explain how plaid cottons from Madras--called Real Madras Handkerchief—became a quintessential sign of Kalabari identity and an essential component of all life course and community rituals. The authors asked four questions: *Selection*, or how was the new cloth selected by society members; *Characterization*, or what is the adopted cloth now called; *Incorporation*, or how has the cloth's use changed vis-à-vis categories of persons who wear it, occasions of wear, and its meaning; and *Transformation*, or how is the cloth physically transformed?

Subsequent research (Daly 1984, 1986; Daly, Eicher and Erekosima 1986; Eicher 1985; Eicher and Erekosima, 1987,1996, 1997; Erekosima1989; Erekosima and Eicher 1994; Michelman 1987,1992; Michelman and Eicher 1995; Michelman and Erekosima 1992) on Kalabari textile use conforms with the view that all Indian textiles imported by the Kalabari receive some degree of cultural authentication into local cultural life. Among other things this is exemplified by the provision of unique names for imported textile designs and the care with which even old Indian textiles are preserved.

The cultural authentication perspective was later adopted by Steiner (1994), who extended it to the analysis of four separate instances around the world. He concludes that indigenous communities have incorporated elements of apparel technology and textiles from colonizers while resisting their colonial domination.

The idea of pulling together cultural authentication theory, fashion, and the global factory arose out of my own research (Lutz 2003) into design emergence in the contemporary production in India of gold-embroidered velvets for export to the Kalabari of West Africa.[2] I found an exuberant niche industry producing a broad array of textiles whose design development is characterized by cross over within and outside the niche. I also learned the on-going design development has to be understood in terms of a global factory. Indian and West African textile traditions; government policies of India, Nigeria, and the many countries with which they have negotiated trade agreements; experiences of colonialism and independence; the contemporary Indian fashion industry, and textile traditions and fashion industries in other parts of the world all have an impact on the physi-

[1] For a full discussion of Blim's view of the global factory as applied to the production of a contemporary textile, see Lutz (2003).

[2] This analysis relies on research I conducted in 1997 in and around Chennai, formerly Madras, into the production and trade of gold-embroidered velvets bound for West Africa; on published photographs of domestic Indian velvets (Gupta 1996); on an examination of published and field photographs of Eicher (1979-1994), on Daly's (1984) and Michelman's (1992) research on Kalabari textiles and dress; and on observation of expatriate West Africans' dress at Igbofest celebrations in St. Paul, MN.

cal form of textiles made in India for West Africa. In one part of my analysis I used cultural authentication to query the production and export process from the perspective of the destination market for the Chennai-made textiles, with illuminating results. However, before I share those results, I need to define more specifically the textiles I researched.

Chennai Textile Production for West Africa

One group of textiles are each 1 x 8 yards in size, each cloth consisting in 8 identical yard-square handkerchiefs. Real Madras Handkerchief, or RMHK, is a hand woven, cotton plaid cloth.[3] Some RMHKs are embroidered in art silk threads (fig. 1). RMHK Fancy is hand woven in plain cotton with brocade borders in art silk yarns. Fancies are also sometimes embroidered (fig. 2) and now include metallic thread and embroidery-applied appliqués and beading. Washwash consists in a synthetic ground cloth, with metallic embroidery and beads delineating the handkerchiefs (fig. 3). Its lower selvage is finished with faux gold or cotton trim. Imitations of akwete, pelete-bite,[4] kente and other West African textiles are also woven in cotton in 1 x 8 yard sizes.

Sari George (fig. 4) departs from the handkerchief format. Developed from the Benarsi silk brocade sari, Sari Georges are woven in art silk and Lurex®-type metallic yarns. On embroidered versions metallic chain stitches incorporate imitation pearls.

Figure 1 (left). One panel of an eight-handkerchief hand loomed cotton RMHK with hooked-needle chain-stitch embroidery executed in rayon yarns in the center. The size of this particular RMHK was redesigned from the normal square to suit the embroidered West African iconic design. Photograph by the author.

Figure 2 (right). One panel of an 8-handkerchief long hand loomed RMHK Fancy. Each yard-square handkerchief consists of a cotton ground with woven jacquard borders in rayon. Central motifs are jacquard woven or, as in this example, hooked-needle embroidered in chain stitches of rayon yarn. Photograph by the author.

[3] Refer to the Eicher paper in this panel presentation for an image of RMHK.

[4] Refer to the Eicher paper in this panel for images of real and imitation pelete-bite.

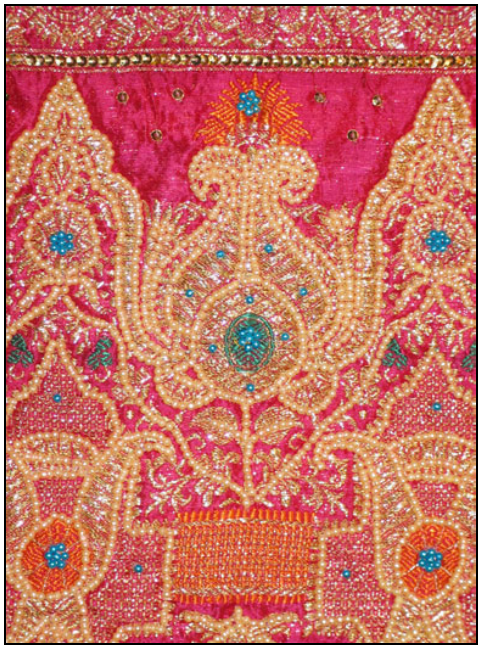

Figure 3 (left). One panel of an 8-handkerchief long Washwash textile. Aside from the industrially woven synthetic satin ground cloth, the handkerchief design of each panel is created by means of hooked-needle embroidery in colored metallic threads and beading. The bottom edge (as worn) is finished in a metallic jacquard trim. Photograph by the author.

Figure 4 (right). Detail of embroidery-applied beading (hooked-needle chain stitch technique) on the end border of a Sari George textile. The beading follows the brocade pattern in this rayon and metallic tape-yarn copy of a real silk and gold Benarsi sari of Indian tradition. Photograph of the author.

Another group of textiles arose from the Indian tradition in gold-embroidered velvets. Velvets exported to West Africa from Chennai in the early 1980s consisted in cotton backed velvet grounds embroidered in metallic yarns in chain stitch and edged in metallic fringe (fig. 5). Ethnic Chic Velvets added faux cloth-of-gold appliqués, colored metallic threads, beading, a variety of edge treatments including bead fringe, and even velvet patches on top of the cloth-of-gold patches (fig. 6). Jet Age Velvets (fig. 7) consist in velvet patches embroidery-appliquéd with metallic threads and beads onto faux cloth-of-gold ground cloths. Edge treatments vary. Feather Velvets (fig. 8), push the Jet Age Velvet design into the third dimension with layers of appliquéd feather shapes and embroidered raw edge treatment.

Velvet covered fans embroidered in metallic thread are also produced for West Africa from time to time. Women's hats constructed of cloth, beads, and metallic fringe are produced in large quantities for the Kalabari market.

These exuberant textiles are purchased only by West Africans, and are never presented for sale in India.[5] Neither are they sold in any other country in the world, except to reach expatriate West Africans. Indian exporters, manufacturers, middlemen, weavers, and embroiderers have specifically worked to develop designs that appeal to West Africans.

[5] The velvet covered fans are an exception as they may be sold within India. They are exported to other countries, too.

Figure 5. An early gold-embroidered velvet in the Chennai production for export to the Kalabari market diverges from much of the tradition for velvets embroidered for the Indian market. The symmetry is now 2-way rather than 4-way, the text and enlarged motifs are also new, and the embroidery is done with the hooked-needle rather than the straight. Photograph by the author.

Figure 6. Detail of an elaborate Ethnic Chic velvet with purple velvet patches on top of faux cloth-of-gold patches on top of a red velvet ground, with metallic embroidery and beading. Photograph by the author.

Figure 7. Jet Age Velvets, like this, reversed the ground/appliqué relationship between the velvet and imitation cloth-of gold of the earlier Ethnic Chic design generation in gold-embroidered velvets, producing the "lighter [weight] velvets" requested by West African consumers. The green, red, and blue cloths are velvet. Photograph by the author.

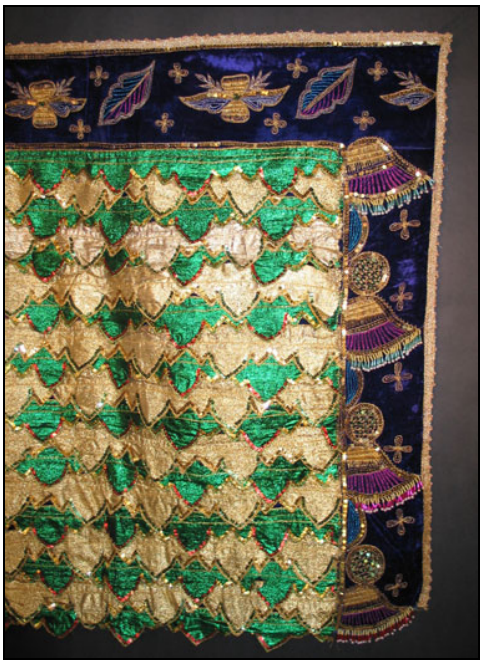

Figure 8. This detail of one end of an early Feather Velvet reveals its three-dimensional overlapping feather shapes and loss of the lower border typical of gold-embroidered velvets made for the local Indian market. Note the addition of bead fringes, also found in contemporary Indian women's high fashion apparel. Photograph by the author.

Application of Cultural Authentication to Indian Production and Export Processes

Initial results of the application of cultural authentication to the Indian production and export processes did not present any surprises. West African wholesale buyers, for instance, travel to Chennai to *select* from among the design samples and finished textiles that their Chennai trading partners have developed. On these visits they may also *select* from among a set of possible color ways assembled by the manufacturer for a design proposed by either the wholesale buyer or the manufacturer. Indian manufacturers *characterize* their products with brand labels, logos, and hang-tags. Also, manufacturers are dependent upon West African wholesale buyers for help in designing the textiles in dimen-

sions facilitating their *incorporation* into specific uses in West Africa. Also, the transformation question is not strictly applicable, since it is too early to be asking about items' transformation before they have been produced.

Of greater interest is my discovery of *de-authentication* practices surrounding the textiles' lives in India. In particular I observed de-authentication through modes of *characterization* and *incorporation*, or more accurately *de-incorporation*.

De-authentication through Modes of Characterization. A de-authenticating characterization of the textiles is evident in the use of generic rather than specific names for the textiles during production and export. Embroiderers, for example, characterize the textiles as "Africa cloth" [translated from Tamil] or "that thick cloth" [translated]. These generic characterizations contrast with the textiles' unique identities in West African. "Africa cloth" does not even acknowledge the many distinct localities in West Africa to which the different designs are bound. "That thick cloth" refers to the embroiderers' difficulty pushing the needle through the cloth, an experience that contrasts with the ease with which they embroider the thinner ground cloths of products destined for the Indian national market. Difficulty embroidering textiles bound for West Africa remains the same whether the cloth is velvet, synthetic satin, art silk, or cotton. Changes in embroidery design do not alter the cloths' relationship to the embroiderers' difficulty performing their work. Thus more specific names for designs are locally irrelevant.

Manufacturers occupy a position in the trade network closer to West African markets, yet their names for the textiles remain very generic. In conversations between Chennai manufacturers and Government of India administrators of the Multi-Fiber trade agreements negotiated with other nations, the several velvet design lines are all referred to by a legal trade identity, that is "India Items," or "oRhni," meaning "shawl" or "veil." Under the guise of a traditional Indian garment, the textiles enter wealthy nations without duty or quota restriction to reach expatriate West Africans, like the Nigerian women I saw wearing Ethnic Chic Velvets during a 1996 cultural celebration in St. Paul, MN.

Speaking with their wholesale buyers, manufacturers employ another set of generic terms. For example, they refer to all four varieties of embroidered velvets as "Velvet" or "Velvet George," distinguishing them from the broader grouping of "George" by which some[6] of their wholesale buyers refer to all textiles imported from India. For specific designs within a line, manufacturers employ names derived from the physical characteristics of the textiles. "Patch India" refers to the Ethnic Chic Velvet design line's characteristic appliquéd patches. "Butterfly" refers to a design within the group of Ethnic Chic Velvets, one with a huge butterfly appliqué in the middle. A production name as specific as this quickly falls from a manufacturer's vocabulary, unless the named design remains popular for a long time, greatly enriching the manufacturer.

Manufacturers are aware that textiles acquire more specific names in West Africa. Yet de-authentication is evident in the restriction of their knowledge of such names to only those they find amusing, such as the translated "Don't Come Near Me If You're Not Rich" or the African English "Madam Cross Madam." Unamusing West African names have little utility for the Chennai manufacturers.

[6] The Kalabari, including the Kalabari wholesale buyers I met, do not use the term "George," but their nearby neighbors do.

The changing names of any textile can be traced as it travels from its place of origin to its consumption site. As the names change towards West Africa, they show some increase in specificity, yet retain a generic character until a textile is uniquely named in the West African neighborhood in which it becomes authenticated. In India textiles acquire only generic and functional names arising from the production and trade processes.

De-authentication through Modes of Incorporation. De-authentication also occurs in the manner the Chennai textiles are incorporated into producers' everyday life. The textiles are not used in local religious observances. Manufacturers' treatment of the textiles communicates the sentiment that the cloths are of no local consequence. For example, the textiles are used in the construction of jokes. When I asked one manufacturer "How are the gold-embroidered velvets used by the consumer?" his assistant draped a velvet over his shoulders, clowning a role he identified as "king" to the amusement of all senior and junior staff members present. In another manufacturer's office, my request to photograph a hat produced for Kalabari women elicited a similar instance of clowning (fig. 9).

Figure 9. A Chennai family firm's junior member dons a sample of the gold-fringed hats they manufacture for the Kalabari women's market. He clowns for the photograph of the hat, to the enjoyment of his uncle, indicating the hats have no local cultural importance. Photograph by the author.

Another method of incorporation of the cloths consists in use of damaged goods for lowly tasks. Water damaged RMHK Fancies are pieced together to make floor-spreads upon which undamaged textiles can be stored, or employees can sit while performing quality checks on textiles. Such use indicates that these textiles are given no local respect beyond what they earn in the export market. Among the Kalabari, in contrast, authenticated Indian textiles are curated with care, no matter how faded and damaged they become.

Conclusion of Application of CA to Indian Export Textiles

Use of the textiles and their West African names in the production of comedy, use of damaged textiles for strictly utilitarian purposes, and reference to the textiles through generic or legal trade names mark these local products as irrelevant to local cultural life. This places them in the narrowly delimited arena of wage labor, business profits, and

government regulation. Cultural de-authentication leaves the field for cultural claim to the Chennai textiles open to their foreign consumers, despite their Indian provenance.

Both West African consumers and Chennai textile industry personnel *have* significant connections to the made-for-export textile. The Indians make them and the West Africans use them. They are also both separated from the textile in important ways, the West Africans by geography and the Indians by a process of cultural de-authentication. The application of cultural authentication questions to an exporting situation has led to the construction of a new concept, cultural de-authentication. I think it will be useful in understanding the social lives of other textiles and apparel in our globalizing world.

The Panel of Papers

Since my own use of cultural authentication theory in an export situation bore significant theoretical fruit, I invited other scholars to come together in this panel and subject their own research on textiles and cloth apparel to the four cultural authentication questions. The panel papers (Akou, Breu, Eicher, and Torntore) bring cultural authentication theory to the complex textile and apparel streams of cross-cultural adoption occurring in the cosmopolitan cities, electronically connected rural hinterlands, transnational societies, and for-export production sites characterizing contemporary societies around the world. Together these papers demonstrate that cultural authentication is as much about being at the cutting edge of fashion as about being true to one's cultural heritage.

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